



Respecting HISTORY

Earnhardt Jr. raids vault of NASCAR movie classics

By RICK MINTER
Cox News Service

Atlanta
Dale Earnhardt Jr. is the face of NASCAR's present and future, but a big part of his heart is in the past.

He says he is proud of every trophy he has won at some of the newer tracks across the country, but his most treasured victories have come at the sport's old speedways where he once roamed the infield with the little die-cast cars while his dad, the legendary Dale Earnhardt, raced.

He bought his first racing movie at a souvenir trailer when he was a kid tagging along with his dad.

"It had old footage of the '70s," he said.

"That was when I really wanted to know more."

So he has obtained an amazing collection of racing films from that era, and he studies them to learn everything he can about the sport's early days.

The love for the old footage is so strong that Earnhardt is starting a production company. He plans to become the narrator for the old films, and the Speed Channel is negotiating for 10 episodes.

Earnhardt said he's excited about sharing his interest with NASCAR fans.

"A lot of fans, if they're like me, can't get enough of the past, and a lot of the new fans probably want to know what the sport was like," he said, adding that for today's fans to truly understand the sport, a history lesson is in order.

"When you take history class, you're not just taught about the past five years and the present day," he said.

"To tell what's happening today, you've got to know the story from the beginning."

Earnhardt thinks NASCAR was never better than in the 1970s, when legends like Cale Yarborough, David Pearson and Richard Petty were in their prime, and independents such as Frank Warren and Cecil Gordon, and sometimes Earnhardt Sr., filled the field, hoping for breaks that would make them frontrunners.

"I liked the way the cars looked then," Earnhardt said. "I liked the tolerance from good to bad in the field and how big a difference it was."

"It's the most interesting era of this sport."

Through the years, he has studied numerous films, carefully dissecting the moves Pearson and Petty and Yarborough and Bobby Allison used to beat up on each other.

"That was the best tool just to figure out who raced who, and how who raced, and get an idea of the mentality of Cale Yarborough and David Pearson, specifically," he said, adding that Yarborough impressed him the most.

"I bet Bobby Allison won't be happy to hear this, but if I'd been 20 or 30 years old watching races back then, I'd have probably pulled for Cale," he said.

"He was willing to do whatever it took."

Earnhardt has other heroes from the past, including Jimmy Means, Jim Vandiver and Coo-Coo Marlin, who always seemed to be able to push their inferior equipment to the front at Talladega and Daytona. He liked Ray Elder, the sport's original road course "ringer," who won



DAVID TULIS / Cox News Service

Dale Earnhardt Jr. may very well be one of NASCAR's stars in the 21st century, but he has a profound respect for the sport's formative days in the 1970s.

two Cup races on the old road course at Riverside, Calif.

"It was cool to have their names pop up there," he said. "Back then, the same four or five guys were racing up front, but every once in a while, somebody would pop up in what you knew was not as good equipment and have a decent run."

Early in his Late Model career, Earnhardt actually raced against one of the old stars, when 1978 Talladega winner Lennie Pond, who retired from the Cup series in 1989, showed up for a 1995 race at Carolina Motor Speedway.

"We ran side by side for a little bit," Earnhardt said. "I broke a right front wheel and crashed right in front of him, but that was awesome."

"I couldn't believe I was racing against Lennie Pond. I couldn't believe it. I just couldn't. He'd won Talladega (17) years before."

Earnhardt would like to learn more about his grandfather, Ralph Earnhardt, who died of a heart attack in 1973, the year before Junior was born. The enduring image of his grandfather comes from — naturally — old racing footage he watched years ago with his dad.

"Granddaddy ran second to Fireball Roberts or Curtis Turner or somebody that was a regular Grand National driver, but they got thrown out and they gave Ralph the win," Earnhardt said. "They actually interviewed him and asked him what he thought about it."



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DALE EARNHARDT JR.

On racing icon Cale Yarborough (above)

Ralph Earnhardt inherited the victory when the apparent winner was disqualified for using wheels wider than the rules allowed.

"Granddaddy said, 'Well, they told us in the drivers meeting that you couldn't run those wheels, so I guess it was wrong for those guys to do that.'"

"That was the first time I'd ever seen his mannerisms, or seen him speaking, talking, walking. And to watch the look on Dad's face, to see it after it had been so many years since Dad had seen him alive."

"That was really amazing." "The Intimidator" also passed on to his son an appreciation for the old tracks, many of which have been lost to time.

Father and son once went to the site of the old Ontario Speedway in California, which was razed after the 1980 season.

"I'd only seen old tapes of races there from the '70s, but he was like, 'There's where you went to get your pit passes. This is this corner,'" he

said. "You could kind of see some banking. It was eerie, like looking at the Titanic in a way ... really eerie."

In his own Cup career, Earnhardt has come to know how his father felt about the demise of Ontario.

He was there when venerable North Carolina Speedway in Rockingham, N.C., dropped off the Cup schedule.

Initially, he was happy to leave the track after its final race because he wasn't pleased with his performance there.

"But at the same time, I knew that one day I'd be driving by there and you wouldn't recognize the place, and that would be a sad day," he said.

"I never ran great there in my Cup car, but I do have a lot of memories of going there as a child, and I watched a lot of races there."

Earnhardt said he takes great satisfaction in winning races on the tracks that formed the foundation of the NASCAR of today.

"When you win at Atlanta or Bristol or Charlotte or Daytona, tracks that have been there for a very long time and have a lot of history, it's a very good feeling for me," he said.

"I like winning races, obviously, but to go to Atlanta and win is a very different feeling than maybe a Chicago or a California."

"There's a different sense of accomplishment."

"When you've done something that makes you part of a crowd like Petty or Cale or those guys that have won there, and you've seen your daddy win there so many times, it's definitely a different feeling."

Retired driver remains a 'hero' to 'Little E'

Dale Earnhardt Jr. says that none of the older drivers are closer to his heart than Jimmy Means, a relatively unknown driver who raced from 1976 to 1993.

Means, who ran 455 Cup races without a victory, now owns his own struggling Busch team and has an interest in a start-up Cup team. But few newcomers to the sport even know his name. He can roam the garage at will, rarely bothered for an autograph or interview.

Earnhardt talks with him often.

"He was my favorite driver besides my father," Earnhardt said. "It was amazing to me how he did everything with nothing."

Earnhardt said he and Means' son, Brad, who fabricates race car bodies for Nextel Cup teams, used to wander the garage during races, picking up new spark plugs and supplies cast off by the richer teams and taking them to Means' trailer.

"Jimmy maybe didn't even need it, but I was a fan of Jimmy, so it was cool for me," Earnhardt said.

Like others in the sport, Earnhardt was heartened in October of 1987, when powerful team owner Rick Hendrick offered Means one of his best cars for the 500-miler at Lowe's Motor Speedway.

Means had caught Hendrick's eye at Richmond the month before, when he drove his underfunded Pontiac into the lead on three occasions before running out of new tires and finishing eighth.

Means didn't disappoint in qualifying. He was fifth fastest in the Chevy that had been driven earlier that season by Tim Richmond.

Earnhardt, 13 at the time, watched the race from his family's condo overlooking the track.

"They started the race, and Jimmy was driving like he was in his own equipment," he said. "He was taking it easy, fell back a couple of spots, just riding there."

Then came the wreck that ended any hope Means had of parlaying the one-shot deal into a career break.

"There were probably 15 cars in the wreck," Earnhardt said. "Daddy was in it. A bunch of cars wadded up."

Earnhardt wasn't too bothered that his dad crashed, but seeing Means wreck had a profound effect on him.

"I cried and cried and cried," he said. "I just couldn't believe it. A man dug so hard for so long to have a chance like that. How could this world be like that? It hurt me for a long time."

Means said his heart was broken, too. "It's a shame something else didn't come out of it," he said. "But that's life."

Earnhardt said watching Means' trials and tribulations was eye-opening.

"I've got a lot of respect for him, and maybe some way, somehow, just by knowing Jimmy and having spent some time close to him has helped me appreciate things a little more," he said. "Maybe I wouldn't have turned out on the good side that I did."

Likewise, Means has benefited from knowing Dale Jr. He can take satisfaction in the fact that after all these years he's a hero's hero.

"(Earnhardt) is not ashamed to say that I was his hero growing up," Means said. "I'm just amazed that he would still think of me in those terms. It means a lot to me."

— Rick Minter, Cox News Service

NOTEBOOK

NASCAR to restructure regional tours in 2007

Cox News Service

NASCAR has announced it will restructure its regional touring series divisions beginning in 2007.

Citing declining support for the Elite Division racing at all levels, NASCAR said it will focus its resources and efforts on those divisions that will help build and sustain a better developmental program for the future.

"Support for the Elite Divisions has been on the down-

swing for a number of years," said NASCAR Vice-President of Communications and Regional Touring Jim Hunter. "This change will allow NASCAR to focus more attention on the Grand National and Modified touring divisions."

Following the 2006 season, the four current Late Model Elite Division Tours will be discontinued. The Elite Division tours were formed nearly 20 years ago, in the Southeast, Midwest, Southwest and Northwest regions of the United States.

Kvapil, PPI sign deal

Travis Kvapil is slated to replace Bobby Hamilton Jr. as driver of the No. 32 Chevrolet for the 2006 Nextel Cup season.

"PPI Motorsports is excited to have Travis join the Tide Racing team," said Cal Wells III, owner of PPI Motorsports.

"I believe he will be a strong addition to our organization, especially under the tutelage of crew chief James Ince."

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Did you know?

Test sessions for the 2006 Nextel Cup Series season begin next week at Daytona International Speedway to prepare for the Daytona 500 on Feb. 19. Teams that finished the 2005 season with an odd number of owner's points will be testing Jan. 9-11. Teams finishing with an even number of points will be testing Jan. 16-18.

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